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Melodrama and Narrative Fiction: Towards a Typology

Abstract: Recent research on melodrama has stressed its versatility and ubiquity by approaching it as a mode of expression rather than a theatrical genre. A variety of contexts in which melodrama is at work have been explored, but only little scholarly attention has been paid to the relationship between melodrama and novels, short stories and novellas. This article proposes a typology of melodrama in narrative prose fiction, examining four different categories: Melodrama and Sentimentalism, Depiction of Melodramatic Performances in Narrative Prose Fiction, Theatrical Antics and Aesthetics in Narrative Prose Fiction and Meta-Melodrama. Its aim is to clarify the ways in which melodrama, ever since its early days on the stages of late eighteenth-century Europe, has interacted with fictional prose narratives, thereby shaping the literary imagination in the Anglophone world.

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In his play *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) Oscar Wilde has one of the characters, Miss Prism, comment on the three-volume novels popular in the Victorian era by claiming that she likes it when “the good end[...] happily, and the bad, unhappily. That is what Fiction means” (Wilde 2000: 318). While not concerned with the nature of melodrama, this statement puts in a nutshell the question at stake in this chapter: how do melodrama (where traditionally the good win and the bad lose) and the various genres of narrative fiction go together? Given the ease with which the label ‘melodramatic’ is awarded to all sorts of cultural artefacts as well as rhetorical situations today, it seems appropriate to clarify the relationship between melodrama and narrative prose writing and to examine the various forms in which melodramatic elements can seep into novels, novellas and short stories. This relationship has, within an otherwise burgeoning field of melodrama research, been underexplored so far.

In the recent past, melodrama has received much attention as

- “A dominant shaping force of modernity for over two hundred and fifty years” (Carolyn Williams 2012: 193)
- An “agent of modernity” (Bratton et al. 1994: 1)

- An aesthetic, a sensibility, a form of rhetoric (see Mercer and Shingler 2004)
- A “behavioural and expressive model” (Hadley 1995: 3)
- A “social process” which “offers a brief, palatable, non-threatening metaphor which enables an audience to approach and contemplate at close range parameters which are otherwise disturbing to discuss” (Mayer 2004: 146–147)
- An “aesthetics of irritation” (see Loren and Metelmann 2013)

These are just some telling examples chosen from among a number of recent statements and definitions. Today, scholars examine the broader cultural implications of melodrama in processes of social transformation and aim to understand melodrama as an important agent that shapes the way in which we perceive and represent social realities. The list of definitions provided above is evidence of the expansion of melodrama as a mode, rather than, in more formalistic terms, as a genre.

While advances have been made to understand the impact of the melodramatic mode on narrative prose fiction, most notably by Peter Brooks in his 1976 study on *The Melodramatic Imagination*, where he discussed the psychological conflicts of characters in Henry James’s novels, there is more to say on melodrama as a “shaping force”, to use Carolyn Williams’s terminology, on narrative prose fiction. Melodrama now stands for an omnipresent mode of expression that spans various media, but it originated as a stage form and then was quickly carried over into other popular forms of literary expression at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Considering British, American British and American narrative texts from the late eighteenth century to the present day I seek to trace the pervasive reach of melodrama beyond its sites of performance on the stage or the screen. I propose a number of categories that represent different responses to melodrama in ‘non-theatrical’ contexts thereby underscoring its presence as a cultural phenomenon that has influenced modes of representation for the last two hundred years. Following its rise as a stage form, melodrama segued into narrative prose fiction in many guises: as a theatrical form with distinct performance techniques appropriated by novelists; as a mode of imagining the world as a stage governed by good versus bad forces; as a model of making sense of the world; as an enactment of contingency as the ultimate enemy to human endeavour. The following categories – Melodrama and Sentimentalism, Depiction of Melodramatic Performances in Narrative Fiction, Theatrical Antics and Aesthetics in Narrative Prose Fiction, Meta-Melodrama – are meant to be a heuristic device rather than a rigid system of classification and will serve as a first step towards a typology.

Melodrama and Sentimentalism

As a stage form, melodrama was, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a neighbouring genre to that of sentimental fiction. In an English-speaking context, the key text is of course Samuel Richardson's epistolary novel *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1744). Richardson's novel, which depicts a young female servant's astute defence of her virtue against her employer's predatory attempts at seduction, triggered a cult of feeling and sensibility which seized the whole of Europe. With a delay of about forty years or so, sentimentalism also reached the young United States. A literal Pamela craze developed in North America following the US-American publication of radically abridged versions of Richardson's voluminous novel in the 1790s (see Tennenhouse 2007). In its sleek, trimmed-down form (the epistolary structure was often replaced with a more action-oriented third-person narration), the American *Pamela* resembled Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791), a bestselling novel in the following decades. Together with, for example, William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), *Charlotte Temple* firmly belonged to the sentimental genre with its emphasis on emotion and affect, moral rectitude, the threat to female sexuality respectively the sentimental body, the defence of virtue, the appeal to fellow-feeling, hyperbolic forms of expression, exclamatory statements and plots of recognition and reconciliation (see also Merish 2004: 192–193). Many of these key features of sentimental texts also define the conventions of stage melodrama where the body's expressive means are exploited to create an aesthetic of effects. In addition to a shared historical context and their huge popularity, melodrama and sentimentalism both produce an aesthetic of impact and utilize similar themes and *topoi*.

Yet even though melodrama as a stage form and sentimental novels have many things in common, there is a meaningful distinction, which is the much more pronounced regulatory access to feeling in sentimental writing: a sentimental novel seeks to control feelings, to put the emotional energies into their place (see Schweighauser 2012). In contrast, melodrama is about transgression. Sentimentalism is melodrama with the handbrake left on: the discourse of reason and self-analysis that informs sentimentalism (i.e. individuals explore their feelings often in dialogic form and try to master or 'civilize' them) is replaced in melodrama by a mode of excess, where the interplay of pathos and action, which Linda Williams famously defined as a central structural device that propels action (1998: 69), is meant to produce a residue of unruly emotion that cannot be accounted for. However, considering the popularity of subgenres of the novel in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century that combine melodramatic and sentimental features, it is appropriate to include sentimental novels in a typology of melodramatic forms of fiction.

One branch of the sentimental genre that has clear overlaps with melodrama is domestic fiction. Examples here, within a US-American context, are Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall: A Domestic Tale of the Present Time* from the year 1854, E. D. E. N. Southworth's *The Hidden Hand* (1850) or Susan Ward's *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) (see also Merish 2004). *Ruth Hall* is a good example: it tells the story of a woman who, after the disintegration of her nuclear family following her husband's death, needs to redefine herself as a single, professional woman who eventually lands a bestseller as a novelist and, as an unmarried professional woman, looks ahead, against middle class society's conventions, into a bright future. Ruth Hall experiences loss and the shattering of her family due to unfortunate chains of events. In this regard she finds herself the victim of a conflict that is central to melodrama. As Linda Williams once argued, melodramatic plots dwell on the loss and the regaining of spaces of innocence (1998: 65), and the notions of family and home are put centre-stage here, both in a literal and metaphorical sense. A novel such as *Ruth Hall* with its depiction of conflict between the domestic and the outside world thus signals a meaningful development towards the doctrine of separate spheres, which has come to define our understanding of bourgeois gender relations in Victorian Britain and the US (see Vicinus 1977). Novels such as *Ruth Hall* monitor the transformation of gender relations as the crises at their core are caused by the female protagonist trying to find happiness outside the confines of pre-existent gender scripts. In this respect, the early sentimental and domestic novels paved the way for a productive sub-formation of melodrama in film, namely maternal melodrama or the woman's weepy (see Doane 1987, Jacobs 1993, Kaplan 1992).

Another example is Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Here several stock elements of the sentimental tradition such as the virtuous victim-hero, the dying angelic child and the conspicuous narrator are enhanced by a more melodramatic tilt towards suspense and action, which together lance an enormously resonant appeal against slavery. The chase of the escapee slave Eliza, who runs away with her small son to protect him from cruel enslavement across floating ice on the frozen Ohio River, exemplifies melodrama's proneness for action-ridden scenes such as escapes in the nick of time (see Linda Williams 1998: 69 and Neale 1986: 11).

Another category that includes features of the sentimental and the melodramatic mode is the romance, a genre with a long history. Romance inspired works such as *Gone with the Wind*, both the epic novel by Margaret Mitchell (1936) and the epic film by Victor Fleming (1939). Ultimately both an epic family saga and a nostalgic swan song to old social hierarchies, *Gone with the Wind* monumentalizes the aesthetic of melodrama – surface is depth – and instils a sense of pathos into the story of a lost social order. What all the mentioned texts have

in common is their immense popularity: *Charlotte Temple*, *Ruth Hall*, and even more so *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Gone with the Wind*, were extremely commercially successful and have made their way into the popular imagination and the American canon. Furthermore, the latter two novels were both turned into films: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* generated a number of film versions that appeared during the first quarter of the twentieth century; *Gone with the Wind* became an international box office hit comparable to the book in terms of its presence in the cultural imagination.

Depiction of Melodramatic Performances in Narrative Prose Fiction

Melodrama's popularity on the stages in Britain and the United States was unprecedented; its subsequent decline in the twentieth century entailed the rise of another, even bigger phenomenon: melodramatic cinema. A play such as Augustin Daly's *Under the Gaslight* (1867) mirrors the gradual shift of stage melodrama towards the cinematic. Often counted towards the sub-category of 'urban melodrama' because of its emphasis on city grime and crime, it became a huge success. Most memorably, its performance included impressive theatrical effects. Thus, when first performed in New York 1867, the play's original rescue scene – where the villain handcuffs the hero to the train tracks, who is then rescued, just in the nick of time, by the female lead character – quickly made it onto advertisement posters and handbills. During performances, sound and lighting were used to mimic the chuffing sound of the approaching train, steam was blown onto the stage to evoke a sense of impending catastrophe. Both a material expenditure as well as a foray into new staging techniques, the sensationalist rendering of this particular scene marks the beginnings of the transition towards melodramatic film.

Given the omnipresence of many works with melodramatic qualities it is important to understand melodrama not only as literary genre, but also as a form of popular cultural expression that soon grew to be a social phenomenon. As studies by Tice L. Miller for the American stage and Michael R. Booth for the British situation in the nineteenth century have shown, melodramatic performances pulled enormous crowds to the theatres in the big and mid-sized cities. For the people in the audience, a trip to the theatre to see melodrama in performance meant consuming a whole package of entertainment. The actual performance was one thing, the social experience that went with it another. Dressing up, watching people, enjoying drink, food and music – theatre as entertainment

offered a chance of escapism for those whose weekdays were spent fuelling their country's economy. Furthermore, the theatre lent itself as a projection screen, generating new desires.

Because of melodrama's ubiquity in British and American cities and its ability to stimulate the imagination, it comes as no surprise that we find descriptions of melodramatic performances in novels, where they often figure as a backdrop to highlight conflict or are used as a foil against which the hopes and aspirations, the emotional landscapes of the characters, can be set. Daniel Gerould has argued that it is in naturalistic novels in particular that the world of theatre becomes a magnet attracting individuals hoping to climb the social ladder: "Naturalism is melodrama in slow motion, stretched out over many years and many pages, exhaustive in its repetitive thoroughness" (1990: 64). For Naturalist writers, keen to trace evolutions and causal connections that determine human behaviour, the world of theatre acted as a breeding ground for human desires. An example is Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), where a visit to the theatre is an escape for the working class heroine from her dire life in a Bowery sweatshop. For Maggie and for the rest of the audience, these performances are real; they are deeply moved by what they see on stage. Maggie can "los[e] herself in sympathy with the wanderers swooning in snow storms beneath happy-hued church windows" (Crane 1999: 61). The audience immerses itself in the action witnessed on stage; their comportment becomes, itself, a spectacle:

Shady persons in the audience revolted from the pictured villainy of the drama. With untiring zeal they hissed vice and applauded virtue. Unmistakably bad men evinced an apparently sincere admiration for virtue.

The loud gallery was overwhelmingly with the unfortunate and the repressed. They encouraged the struggling hero with cries, and jeered the villain, hooting and calling attention to his whiskers. When anybody died in the pale-green snow storms, the gallery mourned. (Crane 1999: 61–62; qtd. in Gerould 1990: 62)

Another example is Theodore Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie* (1900). In this novel, melodramatic stage performance becomes not only a projection screen for the poor, but also a shaping force on the female protagonist's life who, in the course of the novel, inspired by her experiences in the theatre audience, metamorphoses from a kept woman into a Broadway star, giving her acting debut in Daly's *Under the Gaslight*. In scenes such as the following the melodramatic imagination bleeds into the reality of Carrie's life:

The actor whom they had gone to see had achieved his popularity by presenting a mellow type of comedy, in which sufficient sorrow was introduced to lend contrast and relief to humour [...] Never could she witness a play without having her own ability vividly brought to consciousness [...] She lived as much in these things as in the realities which made up her daily life. (Dreiser 1991: 286–287)

Carrie immediately relates to this performance, which awakens her desire to become part of the theatre world. At the same time, reality and fiction mingle in a potentially hazardous, since deceptive, way.

Thus, there are two points of contact between fiction and the world of melodramatic performance. As a social phenomenon the gaudy world of melodrama reflects the growing urbanization in the nineteenth century that is mirrored in a variety of literary fictional texts. The world of theatre emerges as a world working according to its own laws. It seems to level out differences of class, race and gender. Achieving stardom as an actor or actress is alluring since a means of gaining upward social mobility. But there is another interesting aspect: the world of melodrama as enacted on stage (and later on in film) becomes a counter-reality that can interfere with individuals' real lives. In other words: the immersion into a fictional world, no matter whether they are enacted on stage or conjured up in a novel, becomes a compulsion; the line between fiction and reality is blurred, leading to a misperception of reality. This is the fundamental problem of *Madame Bovary's* malaise in Gustave Flaubert's eponymous novel, i.e. her inability to keep reality and her wish-world apart from each other: "the protagonist is caught between an imaginary world of beauty, romance, and erotic fulfillment and a real world of money, bourgeois convention, and sordid sexuality" (Naremore 1993: 33). These counter-realities not only provide a refuge, but also shape the way in which the individual interacts with the outside world assuming that life follows a script dictated by literary models. In the case of melodrama the effect is equally powerful since the melodramatic imagination relies so strongly on drawing black and white pictures of the world, inviting dramatic conflict. Melodrama here provides a philosophical or moral template that is interiorized, which reveals its meta-dimension of reflection on life that I will return to in the fourth category discussed in this article.

Theatrical Antics and Aesthetics in Narrative Prose Fiction

This category contains narrative texts that adopt elements belonging to theatrical *mise-en-scène*. Nineteenth-century literature is particularly rich in such encounters between dramatic, pictorial and narrative elements: "The nineteenth century revealed a powerful bent in whole classes of fiction to assimilate themselves with drama, while drama itself was under a compulsion to make itself over as a picture" (Meisel 1983: 64).

One way in which melodramatic performance techniques and aesthetic devices enter narrative texts is technical. As Valentine Cunningham shows in his essay, old and new stage technologies lent themselves to melodramatic, metaphorical purposes: the old wooden boards of stages could be instrumentalized to lay bare long-forgotten skeletons; oxy-hydrogen light was useful as a tool to throw light on shady corners previously only barely lit by oil lamps.

Melodrama as a stage form places great emphasis on the language of the body; it has been called a mute genre (see Brooks 1996: 68) or an anti-intellectual one (see John 2011: 26) because it renounces the primacy of the spoken word and privileges the emotive sign language of the body. *Tableaux*, originally a staging technique from the theatre, play an important role here, as they freeze a moment in time and thereby manage to compress complex meaning into one telling, ‘pregnant’ moment and to allow the audience to turn inward for some introspection: they represent what Carolyn Williams described as “an invisible, silent activity of movement within and between subjects” (2004: 105) and exemplify the “iconography of character and emotion” that is typical of Victorian popular culture (Meisel 1983: 5). One famous example of a stage *tableau* appears in a Victorian melodramatic play called *The Rent-Day* (1832) by Douglas William Jerrold about a landlord and his impoverished tenants, where the stage directions have the actors enact a painting by the Scottish painter David Wilkie (see Rippl 2011).

Novels also contain many examples of such emphatic moments where time stands still and bodies speak louder than words, so to speak. An example comes from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which was mentioned above. It is the scene where little Eva, a young angelic girl, lies in state, having died after a long bout of illness:

The statuettes and pictures in Eva’s room were shrouded in white napkins, and only hushed breathings and muffled foot-falls were heard there, and the light stole in solemnly through windows partially darkened by closed blinds.

The bed was draped in white; and there, beneath the drooping angel-figure, lay a little sleeping form, – sleeping never to waken!

There she lay, robed in one of the simple white dresses she had been wont to wear when living; the rose-colored light through the curtains cast over the icy coldness of death a warm glow. The heavy eyelashes drooped softly on the pure cheek; the head was turned a little to one side, as if in natural sleep, but there was diffused over every lineament of the face that high celestial expression, that mingling of rapture and repose, which showed it was no earthly or temporary sleep, but the long, sacred rest which “He giveth to his beloved”. (Stowe 2010: 271)

This passage depicts a typical deathbed scene popular in nineteenth-century literature and photography. The reference to “statuettes”, “shroud[s]”, the sub-

dued light entering through the covered windows and the white dress produce a funereal effect. Little Eva's beauty in death seems to be carved into marble; she has become an "angel figure". While faint noise can be heard from outside the room, this scene brings to a halt the action and dwells on the static observation of this sepulchral moment, bringing into focus the little girl's otherworldly, quasi-saintly being. This emphasis on the non-verbal allows the narrator to evoke strong feelings of sympathy and mourning and to underline the loss that has just occurred.

Tableaux are intriguing moments of intermedial contact between stage performance, the visual arts and – if depicted in a narrative text – literature. They represent instances of conflux where properties of each of these forms of expression meet and mutually enhance each other. The verbal description of techniques that belong to painting or sculpture is a deliberate means of slowing down the narrative process, which is temporal. The narrator allows extra space in the flow of his narrative for the reader to detect nuances of meaning or for a particular emotional appeal to unfold. The broader philosophical context for *tableaux* is the *paragone* discourse that peaked in the eighteenth century. In Britain, it was Lord Shaftesbury, who in his *Characteristicks* from the year 1711 insisted on the importance of choosing the most apposite moment in painting, thereby partaking in a broader discourse on the imagination together with authors such as Edmund Burke and Joseph Addison. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in his famous *Laokoon* essay from 1766 had underscored the material differences of each medium and reflected on the resulting relationship. Drawing upon Shaftesbury, Lessing saw painting as an art form that is spatially oriented and static; poetry being temporal and narrative.

Tableaux remained a popular stage device and descriptive technique during the nineteenth century, George Eliot and Henry James being two major Victorian authors employing this means (see Korte 1993, Brosch 2000, Rippl 2005, Carolyn Williams 2004). An illustrative example comes from Edith Wharton's 1905 novel *The House of Mirth*, which reflects the popularity of *tableaux* as a party game. In the following scene in the novel, a painting by Botticelli is re-enacted:

Tableaux vivants depend for their effect not only on the happy disposal of lights and the delusive interposition of layers of gauze, but on a corresponding adjustment of the mental vision. To unfurnished minds they remain, in spite of every enhancement of art, only a superior kind of wax-works; but to the responsive fancy they may give magic glimpses of the boundary world between fact and imagination [...] Mrs Bry's *tableaux* wanted none of the qualities which go to the producing of such illusions, [...] the pictures succeeded each other with the rhythmic march of some splendid frieze, in which the fugitive curves of living flesh and the wandering light of young eyes have been subdued to plastic harmony without losing the charm of light. (2011: 140–141)

In this passage *tableaux* are described as a mid-way phenomenon where fact and fiction meet, allowing interesting glimpses into human relationships and psychological dispositions that are out of the ordinary. These *tableaux*, by lingering on single moments that would otherwise be subsumed by sequential action, disclose aspects of reality that a merely furtive, superficial glance would not reveal. They highlight particular moments, both on stage and in narrative texts: “Tableaux interrupt and segment the drama into readable passages; they also precipitate a shift in representational registers, calling the audience to an active rather than absorbed relation to the spectacle, asking them to read and interpret the composition” (Carolyn Williams 2012: 208). By stalling the progress of time and action, they unsettle the spectator, inviting the imagination to transcend the moment’s frame of reference, while remaining anchored in the present. Wharton’s connection of the *tableau* with two other ‘plastic’, that is bodily, forms of expression which privilege non-verbal communication, is noteworthy: wax figures are an outstanding medium with a rich cultural history (see Bloom 2003) and the frieze is a hybrid art form, situated between the two-dimensionality of painting and the three-dimensionality of sculpture. Of course, not all *tableaux* are automatically melodramatic; however, they carry an expressive and emotional charge which is a characteristic of melodramatic contexts, transmitting states of heightened, compressed emotions whose verbal spelling out would be less poignant and more heavy-handed. In this regard, *tableaux* exemplify the formula of abbreviation typical of melodrama.

Another sub-category of phenomena where theatre meets the novel manifests itself in melodrama’s propensity for Manichean conflicts. Such conflicts between good and bad forces are often rendered in explicitly theatrical ways: when it comes to the novelistic staging of villainy in the nineteenth century, Charles Dickens’s oeuvre remains unparalleled. Good versus evil, victim versus villain: melodrama’s ‘moral legibility’ (Linda Williams 1998: 52) depends on this dichotomy reiterated in innumerable ways in novels such as *Great Expectations* or *Oliver Twist* (see John 2011).

But moral conflicts can also be submitted to a more refined psychological interpretation, Peter Brooks’s work on the melodramatic imagination being of particular relevance. In the melodramatic tradition the “oppressing outward forces,” to use an expression coined by Thomas Elsaesser (1985: 185), which threaten to crush the individual in melodramatic films, are internalized to the point that melodramatic conflict becomes a conflict of choices carried out in the protagonist’s mind. Thus, the moral conscience of the protagonists becomes the stage of conflict. Brooks focuses on Henry James’s novels such as *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) with its depiction of the subtle weighing up of choices by the protagonist. Other authors whose works can be aligned with those of James are

Thomas Hardy or George Meredith, who addressed the vicissitudes of moral choices in novels such as *The Woodlanders* (1887) and *Diana of the Crossways* (1885) (see Hadley 1995 and Nemesvari 2011).

Meta-Melodrama

The fourth category is the most abstract one since it focuses on the philosophical implications of melodrama. While it is singled out as a separate category, ‘meta-melodrama’ also affects the other categories given its concern with the aesthetic status of melodrama and its moral and epistemological aspects. In this final category I include examples of narrative prose fiction that comment on melodrama as an internalized mode of perceiving and structuring characters’ perception of reality. An important point here is melodrama’s use of contingency that in many instances causes melodramatic pathos – be that in the form of coincidence, accident or bad timing, or what Franco Moretti described as a rhetoric of ‘too late’ (2005: 159). Contingency refers to a variety of experiences, all of which can, but do not have to happen, which is a basic philosophical definition of the contingent as a modality. For literary purposes, one could refer to it as the unintentional, unexpected, incalculable, the amorphous, the unmotivated, the pointless and the unavailable.¹

Contingency affects the narratological structure of a text since to a certain extent any story depends on coincidences, turns of actions, random accidents and other contingent events (see e.g. Dannenberg 2008). But it is, because of its origins in philosophical discourse, also connected to an understanding of and commenting upon the experience of life as governed by arbitrary forces. This reflection on contingency and its relation to modernization becomes a prominent point of consideration in modernist fiction (see Butter 2013), but examples can be found earlier than that. Furthermore, observations on the contingency of life can grow into reflections on the act of writing fiction itself. As I have argued elsewhere (Straub 2014) melodrama entertains a particularly dense but hitherto underexplored relationship with the experience of contingency that is addressed in increasingly self-reflective ways in late Victorian and (post-)modernist fiction. There is a tendency in narrative prose fiction from the late nineteenth century

¹ I am paraphrasing a definition given by Franz Josef Wetz, the German original of which reads as follows: “Die Auslegungsbreite und Bedeutungsvielfalt dieses Wortes kennt keinen Grenzen. So nennt man gegenwärtig oft alles Unbeabsichtigte, Unerwartete, Unberechenbare auch kontingent, außerdem das Wesenlose, Grundlose, Zwecklose und nicht zuletzt alle Unverfügbarkeiten des Lebens” (1998: 81).

onwards to cope with the modern experience of contingency with the help of melodramatic structures, where anything may happen and where unfathomable, but essentially secular good and bad forces clash (in a post-Providential world), undermining the modern subject's claim for self-determination.

Thomas Hardy's novels serve as a good example. In Hardy's fictional universe, late-Victorian anxieties rise against a mythological landscape that usurps the individual and reduces him or her to nihilistic insignificance: Hardy thus creates a stage where indistinct higher powers have the upper hand, resulting in an "aesthetics of astonishment, wherein extreme inner conflicts and contradictions of social identity and consciousness are extroverted onto an expressionistic semiotics of landscapes and bodies" (Dolin 2009: 330). The helplessness of human beings at the mercy of an amorphous fate manifests itself in the bigger scheme of his plotlines that see characters topple towards their own unmaking.

The letter that got wedged underneath a carpet in Hardy's novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) "owing to [Tess] having in her haste thrust it beneath the carpet as well as beneath the door" (1998: 211) initiates the fatal chain of events that exemplifies the contingent frequently included in his writing. The letter contained Tess's confession of her amorous transgression with Alec, the belated revelation of which to her husband Angel Clare will, among other things, cause Tess's doom as she was, according to Victorian standards, a fallen woman. A mere banality in the big scheme of things, the letter incident stands in no relation to the consequences it triggers and the disastrous events that are to follow (on melodrama and disaster, see Heilbrun 1968). Hardy, so runs my claim, stages melodramatic conflict in his novels in a way that self-consciously engages with the tragic dimension of his characters' lives; however, tragedy here no longer implies fatalism in a classical sense but the criss-crossing of human destinies by chance and coincidence. In Hardy's novels human beings are deserted in a world where these Gods have receded, where anything can happen, and where, amidst the deceptive rural peacefulness of Hardy's Wessex, society turns a blind eye to outsiders and transgressors.

With Henry James, fiction enters into relationship with the melodramatic mode on a meta-level of reflection. A key text is his novella *The Beast in the Jungle* from the year 1903. Readable as a portrait of a man who suffers from Kant's *Grillenkrankheit*, i.e. an hypochondriac overcapacity of the imagination enriched with a creative streak, it depicts his life lived in anticipation of the one event that might change it all, the one catastrophe to throw him off his feet and catch him unguarded. Towards the end of the novella, the man will find out that the much feared 'beast in the jungle' had already taken a plunge at him

without him taking heed, in the shape of the illness and impending death of a beloved friend:

What could the thing that was to happen to him be, after all, but just this thing that had begun to happen? Her dying, her death, his consequent solitude – that was what he had figured as the beast in the jungle, that was what had been in the lap of the gods. [...] It wasn't a thing of a monstrous order; not a fate rare and distinguished; not a stroke of fortune that overwhelmed and immortalized; it had only the stamp of the common doom. (James 2003: 329)

James inscribes a meta-melodramatic dimension into this novella when unraveling his character's struggle with the contingency of human existence, a character who spends his life guessing what may happen, waiting for an incisive, life-changing turning point, a tragic *coup de foudre*. James dwells on the human imagination as a realm that is creative, where stories are told and where human existence is figured in dramatic ways, which makes him a melodramatist of the human psyche.

James's interest in the interventions of the contingent provided a foil for authors such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, who, most obviously in "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" (1922) and *The Great Gatsby* (1925) also showed an obsession with the vicissitudes of time, its irrevocability, missed chances and unfortunate coincidences. Furthermore, James paved the way for contemporary British writer Ian McEwan, whose novelistic oeuvre exploits the one significant, life-changing moment that humans encounter fully unprepared. His novel *Atonement* (2001), set during the Second World War, depicts the riches of a young girl's (Briony's) imagination whose ardent desire to see melodrama enacted in real life leads to disaster. Following her false accusation, Robby, the innocent lover of her older sister Cecilia is sentenced for the rape of her little cousin that occurs during a party at the wealthy, landowning family's estate. This act of felony resulted from Briony's need to make sense of a sexual encounter between the couple whose witness she had been, leaving her deeply distressed. Briony's vision of the world is tinted by her knowledge of melodrama's working principles, one of which is female virtue corrupted by male villainy, love corrupted by lust – a theoretical knowledge that she puts into practice when authoring plays she stages at family gatherings, plays in which for example "[t]he reckless passion of the heroine, Arabella, for a wicked foreign count is punished by ill fortune" (McEwan 2001: 3). Following the logic she has learned from melodramatic conventions, she authorizes a string of actions to unfold that will affect her life and that of those closest to her. She thereby follows her "controlling demon" that makes her crave "a harmonious, organised world" (McEwan 2001: 5) where everything is in place and where wrongdoing is punished. The bigger frame that McEwan applies to this novel is only revealed dexterously towards its end,

when Briony's identity as the novel's narrator, who has become a successful novelist and writes this story in old age as an act of atonement, is disclosed. Given its strong meta-fictional dimension (see Finney 2004 and D'Angelo 2009), *Atonement* is also a novel that engages with melodrama's potential to shape the way humans think about the real world, for the better or the worse. In a novel such as *Atonement*, melodrama has become the ruling force of the human mind-set (see Straub 2014: 238–240).

To conclude, the four categories introduced in this chapter are meant as invitations to further research on the interconnections between melodrama and narrative prose fiction. While I was able to draw upon a number of studies that have discussed particular aspects of these relations, I would argue that a large-scale systematic approach is still missing. In this chapter I have brought together texts in groups to each of which many more could be added. It was not my aim to sketch a historical trajectory. However, these categories (among which are interesting overlaps) certainly reflect developments of melodrama that are historical. Its roots lie in the French Revolution (see Brooks 1996, Buckley 2009), but as a form of writing and entertainment it depended on the broader appeal of sentimentalism and sensationalism. Melodrama's popularity and success as a stage form provided another point of contact, as during the nineteenth century it became an important cultural backdrop that novelists exploited for their own purposes, including depictions of melodramatic performance in their works or using theatrical and expressive means common to melodrama, such as the *tableau*. With James, at the end of the nineteenth century, melodrama undergoes an inward turn: his works stand at the beginning of a line that sees modernist and postmodernist writers engage with melodrama on a meta-level of reflection, thinking about writing and the literary imagination, the laws of time and the role of contingency in human existence. At this point at the latest it becomes clear that melodrama in contemporary narrative prose fiction requires the clarification of a number of difficult aesthetic and philosophical concepts which cannot be the subject of this chapter.

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